

# Purple Martins and Mosquitoes

(The following is an excerpt from an article written by Herbert W. Kale, II entitled The Purple Martin. Herbert Kale is Vice President of Ornithology for the Florida Audubon Society and co-author of Florida's Birds - A Handbook and Reference.)

Of all the species of birds that have been adapted to close association with man in North America, the Purple Martin has probably become the most dependent on human generosity. Except for some populations in the far west and a few scattered pairs here and there in the east, the Purple Martin nests almost exclusively in apartment housing provided by people who want to attract them to their yards. This practice extends back several hundreds of years when native Americans provided hollow gourds to attract martins to their garden plots.

The largest member of the swallow family, Purple Martins are seven inches long and weigh about 17 ounces. Adult males are glossy purple-black overall and adult females are dusky-gray in front, with brown backs washed with purple on the head, neck, shoulders, back, and rump. Sub-adult females have brown upperparts and whitish fronts.

Martins arrive in Florida from their South American wintering grounds beginning in early January, and those that breed in the state usually depart by the end of July, while northern birds migrate through Florida in September and October. Rarely, some martins may overwinter in southern Florida.

Nesting occurs in Florida from March through early July. Four to six, rarely seven white eggs are laid and incubated for 16 days, and young fledge 26-30 days after hatching.

The diet of Purple Martins is composed entirely of insects, chiefly beetles and dragonflies. Although martins occasionally eat mosquitoes, they comprise only 1-3% of the diet. No scientific evidence exists to support the claim that martins can "control" mosquito populations. However, one does not need an economic justification for providing living